

Twenty-First-Century Adolescents, Writing, and New Media: Meeting the Challenge with Game Controllers and Laptops

The authors provide suggestions for using popular video games to engage students in authentic expository, persuasive, and creative writing.

Late in the evening, in the village of Cyrodill, in the world of *Morrowind*, the elf lord Batama picks up his claymore and hacks his way into the underground lair of the Dark Ones who are guiding the secret and the next clue needed to complete the mission of the current quest. For Batama to succeed, he relies on his compatriots. Batama is the projective identity (Gee 4) of “Davis,” a 15-year-old adolescent gamer in the middle of writing a collaborative novel based on the character of Batama. Davis uses multiple venues to discuss his work, the game, and the politics of play. His work is constructed and developed through blogging; researching game information online through textual, auditory, and visual means; as well as communicating with friends through instant messaging, texting, and social networking. In his venture of collaborative writing and virtual discovery, Davis, like Batama, is not alone but is aided by other gamers, primarily a fellow classmate who is also an avid gamer.

Today’s youth come to the English language arts class with a diverse range of ideas and experiences that give them the ability to develop and blossom into proficient and talented writers for multiple audiences; constant engagement with new media and digital literacies provides them multiple opportunities and multiple channels through which to explore these ideas. In particular, video games can provide today’s adolescent a deeper understanding of real-world issues and real-world audiences.

While several published articles address the connection between video gaming and reading

(Adams; Gerber; Jolly), few address the connection between writing and video games. The nature of the video game allows for the development of awareness and passion for topics of interest, which students then weave into intricate stories, guides, and debates (Gerber 88). Given that over 90% of today’s students regularly participate in gaming (Lenhart), harnessing this medium may engage students in something integral to the English language arts classroom: reading and writing for multiple audiences with multiple purposes and through multiple genres. We are not advocating vast inclusion of video games in the classroom but are interested in providing suggestions for ways teachers might incorporate what is already happening in homes across the country into writing that students do within the English classroom.

Motivating adolescents to engage in the traditional literate activities of today’s classroom is in constant competition with the fast-paced multimodal nature of new media and digital literacies. Traditional school finds itself battling the engaging media of Facebook, YouTube, and the latest video game on a daily basis (Gee 5; Hull and Schultz 3). However, these media should not be seen as an opposing force to the traditional goal and nature of the English classroom—they should complement and enhance the learning happening in the classroom. These new literacies allow students to examine life and learning through a different lens than they might otherwise experience with traditional in-school literacies, and encouraging students in this examination of life and learning challenges and

engages them. New media and digital literacies can capture students' interests and experiences and can be viable means in both motivating and engaging them in a process of lifelong learning (Hull and Schultz 3; Kist 5).

The actual games may not be appropriate for all classrooms, but educators can harness the media that students are naturally comfortable with and competent in using. These media can be brought into the English classroom, in appropriate ways, to encourage students in their understanding of the writing process, the multiple genres in writing, and how to write for diverse audiences in a manner that is both appropriate and applicable to the task or topic at hand. While one of the many goals of the English teacher is to teach the above topics to students, the teacher also acts as a guide to help students grasp and understand the subject material—the more invested and interested students are in the topic, the easier the task of motivating them. Often students experience difficulty writing about topics that do not hold their interest and in which they are not invested (Romano

9). The beauty of using video games and new media as a platform for teaching the writing process, writing genres, and purpose of audience in writing lies in the reality that students become more invested in topics based on their existing interests.

This article presents the idea of building on existing interests in video gaming by giving examples and suggestions on ways to motivate and engage students in writing. The ideas presented here result from multiple case studies and interviews with avid adolescent gamers, who wrote extensively outside of school and viewed the writing that they did as meaningless. Additionally, one of the authors is an avid gamer immersed in the culture of gaming. In this article we include some well-established gamer writing venues and platforms adapted for use in diverse classroom situations and with diverse learners to teach the concepts of purpose, audience, and writing process. We examine several genres of writing mandated and required in high school curricula and provides examples for how to motivate students to write for that purpose using a specific video game popular today. Additionally, we discuss different popular media platforms, such as social networks, blogging, and machinima, which may motivate and encourage students to write for multiple audiences and purposes.

It is possible that many students have already played the games listed in this article (their popularity and sales indicate mass appeal). Because of this they could be used as a platform to begin engaging students in multiple genres of writing. However, we do not advocate for bringing the games into the classroom, or forcing students to write about these particular topics—to many youth, part of the appeal of gaming is that it is not connected to school; however, using gaming as a platform, as we describe below, may aid students in successfully engaging in different writing genres, given that comfort level and familiarity with the games allows students to tap into their existing “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al. 133).



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Expository Writing—“It’s called a walk through—and no it’s not cheating”

Expository writing is often the most popular type of writing in which high school students engage (Sebranek, Kemper, and Meyer 156). Expository texts, essays, and pieces of writing relay a particular

piece of information or idea to a specific audience. In gaming realms, a popular expository text is known as the “walk-through.” A walk-through is an informative manual that provides information about the gaming experience to the reader, including background knowledge about the game’s plot, setting, and characters, as well as vital information helpful to players when they get stuck. Many adolescents turn to walk-throughs when they need assistance, and many write their own walk-throughs of favorite games to post to the Web. Many students already do this informally with their friends, so why not take advantage of this and guide them into creating and maintaining effective walk-throughs for popular games that they play. Figure 1 provides a snapshot of a popular game that might be used to get your students involved in expository writing.

To write their walk-throughs, students will need to conduct research on the setting, including the history of groups indigenous to the game’s setting, of specific botany and animal lifeforms (local flora and fauna), and various other items deemed important to the game. This is a perfect place for teachers to require the inclusion of topics being discussed in class—such as particular elements of setting. Including these topics encourages students to take a deeper look into the games they are playing and to research the things that they find important to the game. In the case of *Uncharted 2*, students would research the various countries visited in the game, as well as the indigenous peoples to the area, such as Nepal and Bolivia. Apart from the background research, students also should include character lists and detailed descriptions of those characters. This ensures that they become familiar with the charac-

ter and their typical emotional state and attitude as viewed in the cut-scenes (short, movie-like scenes that are played throughout the game experience).

For a walk-through to be complete it must also include detailed descriptions of each scene and how to successfully navigate that scene. In the *Uncharted* series the scenes are broken up into 26 chapters. Other games may separate the scenes in a different manner. The student writes a brief description of each scene and includes a detailed description of how to navigate and “beat” each scene. This requires a detailed familiarity with the scene; thus, the student’s writing must be clear and explicit about how one would successfully navigate each scene. To make the writing as authentic as possible, and to allow students to receive critique and feedback from their peers, students might be encouraged to post their walk-through on any of the many game sharing websites.

Persuasive Writing—“Social networking is my life, and what, you say my blog is persuasive writing?”

Many adolescents keep blogs and use them to foster civic engagement and debate (Lenhart). Web logs, or blogs, are forums where individuals discuss and debate current events, common perceptions, and new ideas in a forum that allows for dialogue and discussion. Blogs provide an excellent place for adolescents to practice their hand at persuasive writing. Many video games provide material that allows students to discuss moral and ethical issues important to good persuasive writing, which is often one of the more difficult kinds of writing for secondary students and college students (Sebranek, Kemper, and Meyer 185). Because blogs are a familiar forum for most students, they provide an excellent platform for adolescents to discuss, dialogue, and then debate these issues from video games.

The kinds of active, persuasive writing that occurs on blogs makes them a wonderful venue for getting adolescents, who can be extremely opinionated and frequently believe that their ideas and opinions are the most important ones, to understand and see other perspectives on issues. Many video games offer perspectives from which controversial issues can be argued and debated. The genre of first-person shooter, or FPS, is one that especially allows

FIGURE 1. *Uncharted* Action-Adventure Game

A popular game on the Playstation 3 console (PS3) is the *Uncharted* series, which is like a modern-day Indiana Jones. The *Uncharted* series is rated T for Teen. Currently there are two games in this series—they fall under the action-adventure genre, which may be an easier genre to begin to use to get your avid gamers into writing both creative and expository pieces. Your students who play video games will know what genre game they are playing (as it generally lists it on the package), but in case they are unsure of the genre, action-adventure games often involve a compelling plot with a series of events and puzzles that must be solved to beat the multiple levels and win the game.

for students to critically examine a topic and try to persuade people to understand and see their viewpoint. Figure 2 presents a popular FPS game that might be used as a platform for persuasive writing.

There are multiple ways students could develop the art of persuasion using the video game *Bioshock*, or any FPS game that uses a compelling storyline. One way would be to set up a class Ning, which is a free social network service. Students set up profiles for various characters in the game that are designed in a manner that closely matches the personality and attributes of a particular character. In *Bioshock*, topics related to anti-utopian ideas, as well as questions and issues dealing with morality in killing innocent citizens in the game to succeed in a mission, could be discussed. Within the class Ning, students can be prompted to take opposing sides of the issues in the game and write persuasive blogs about these events and post them to their personal Ning site. This would also require that students research information related to the issues explored in the game. In the case of *Bioshock* students would need to research dystopian societies, politics, and possibly economics. They could write persuasive arguments for, or against, whatever side they take and then be required to respond from that viewpoint to a peer's opposing viewpoint.

Other first-person shooter games include topics that allow for a similar assignment. For example, many shooters rely on war stories. Some game developers even designed the story around actual wars, such as the *Call of Duty* series, or future wars, such as the *Halo* or *Resistance Fall of Man* series. Students who are taking part in writing persuasive pieces related to these games could conduct research on war

and causes of war and then write a persuasive blog within the Ning from the viewpoint of one of the characters in one of the military groups. Responses could come from any character or individual from the opposing military group. This would allow students to see and respond to opposing viewpoints in a considerate, logical, and disciplined manner. The persuasive writing assignment described above allows students to assume a role, design a profile within a social networking site for that particular role, and then research, write, and respond to the topic. This happens in a venue where students feel comfortable, which may allow students a more-engaged entry into the complex genre of persuasive writing.

Creative Writing—"I get to write fanfiction, here, in class?"

Creative writing provides students a venue most have already experienced. Some students may already write novels, poetry, and other creative pieces born out of occurrences within their gaming experiences (Gerber 88). Creative writing is expressive, and often students experience an easier time with writing creative pieces. However, multiple new media exist that allow students to take part in creative writing while allowing them to engage in the visual aspects of creativity through YouTube, machinima, and videos. A particular game genre that facilitates this is the action-adventure genre. Figure 3 discusses a series popular with today's students.

Incorporating new media allows students to take what they know about a game's storyline, either through game play and/or reading related books and watching related movies, and then use screen captures from the game, or digital video recorders to film a scene and create their own video. Students could write poetry, musical lyrics, short stories, or screenplays. They could begin their writing process

FIGURE 2. *Bioshock* First Person Shooter Game

A popular shooter game that offers many viewpoints from which students can argue is *Bioshock*. *Bioshock*, like most shooters, is rated M for Mature due to violence in the game. This alone can serve as a platform for debate and persuasion with students—how much violence is too much violence to allow in a game despite its popularity. The first *Bioshock* was an extremely popular game and won game of the year in 2007. *Bioshock 2* (a prequel) was released in the spring of 2010. A unique aspect about *Bioshock* is that it offers players a glimpse into a dystopian society, where the poor decisions of its citizens have led to the demise of the civilization.

FIGURE 3. *Legos* Action-Adventure Games

The *Lego* games provide an excellent platform for exploring multiple genres of writing. The *Lego* games are rated E for Everyone and are based on books, movies, and popular tales. Some of the *Lego* titles include *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Batman*, and *Harry Potter*. Because these are tales that are familiar to many students, they allow students to further story lines, add characters to the tale, or change the ending of the tale.

FIGURE 4. Video Game–Writing Genre Connections


Gaming Genres	Gaming Titles	Writing Genres	Writing Examples
Action Adventure	<i>Uncharted Series</i> <i>Lego Series</i> <i>Prince of Persia</i>	Expository	Walk-Throughs
Role-Play Game (RPG)	<i>Fable 1–3</i> <i>Final Fantasy Games</i> <i>Elder Scrolls Series</i>	Persuasive	Blogs
First-Person Shooter (FPS)	<i>Halo</i> <i>Bioshock Series</i> <i>Call of Duty Series</i>	Persuasive	Digital Storytelling
Massively Multiplayer Games (MMOG)	<i>World of Warcraft</i> <i>Conquer Online</i> <i>Call of Duty Series</i>	Creative	Machinima Fanfiction
Real-Time Strategy (RTS)	<i>Rise of Nations</i> <i>Civilization</i>	Expository	Walk-Throughs and Game Guides
Sporting Strategy	<i>NCAA Football</i> <i>Tiger Woods Golf</i>	Expository	Digital Storytelling

by examining what they know about the story and game, and then furthering that by sketching out new characters and plot twists or new settings. Once students have a final draft of their creative writing piece, they can design visual enhancements of their writing. In addition to adding another dimension of creativity, including visual components would also strengthen students' use of visual rhetoric, an important skill for students to understand and navigate in today's digital era.

To incorporate visual enhancements from games, students need to either use screen captures from their game play (free screen capture software can be downloaded online) or use digital video recorders (which are available on many phones, cameras, and even laptops). Students can work through their selected visual images and overlay their poem, story, or screen play with free video editing software such as Movie Maker by Microsoft. Once these videos are complete, edited, and in a presentable format, they can be loaded onto a video sharing site, such as YouTube, or Voicethread for feedback from others, giving a more authentic finish to the students' work.

Validating Youths' Literacy

If we want students to produce powerful writing and to engage in experiences that open their eyes to the role powerful writing plays in influencing and informing others, then it is important for teachers

to recognize and validate the literacies that youth bring with them to the classroom. To guide teachers who may not be familiar with the various genres of video games, we have provided a table (see fig. 4) that lists gaming genres and pairs those genres with specific game titles and writing genres. We hope that this will aid teachers who might want to begin to help students connect their writing with their gaming experiences. By understanding and validating these experiences, and by allowing students to write on topics about which they are passionate and knowledgeable as an impetus and platform for writing multiple genres for multiple audiences, teachers may help students become more proficient writers and even enjoy a subject that they may have at one time dreaded. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The authors of the article shared how they integrated social media and gaming into the classroom to help motivate students. "The Blog of Anne Frank?: Taking on Social Roles through Online Writing" does something similar. After reading or viewing *The Diary of Anne Frank*, students consider how political news spread in the time of World War II. Then, they investigate how online digital media contributes to the distribution of news in recent events, such as the Iranian revolution in 2009. This background will contribute to students' design and development of a blog on a local political topic. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/blog-anne-frank-taking-30721.html>

Talking Video Games with my Stepson, 12 Years Old

You can be a robber, an outlaw,
A bandit, he tells me,
His small body pliant and relaxed on our old couch
Nubby with years of contraband shoes up
And sleepovers with pals, the living room a hymn
of boys' breath and skin and dreams.

His favorite game is a western, he says,
The buttes rise up orange in a sunrise
Over a covered wagon and saguaro cactus,
And his current obsession: tumbleweeds.
Yesterday he asked how to grow one, a
tumbleweed,
And if we could do that sometime soon.

He solemnly explains that another cowboy dude
Got thrown into a cage too small to stand up in.
The crowd threw carrots and loaves of bread at
him, he says,
"so I had to go in and rescue him, save his life."
I ask "do you think he would have done that for
you" and he says
"I don't know, but that isn't the point."

A day later I learn the game is called Redemption.
It took years for me to learn he was mine.

—Robbin Jack Brimhall
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